

Have You Heard The News? by  
Aragorn!

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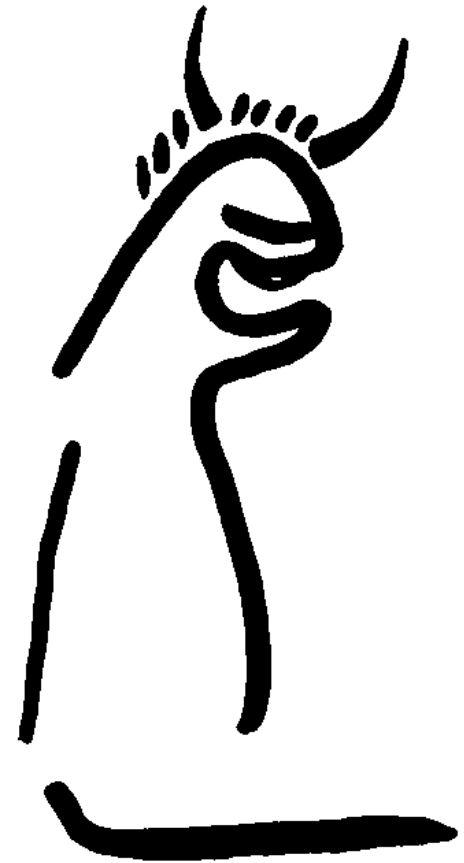
Anthropology As Science Fiction  
by Dominique Ganawaabi

edited and distributed by marsh house

**marshhousepoetry@protonmail.org**

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Two Critiques of John Zerzan's Anarcho-Primitivism



This essay contains two articles, one by Aragorn! originally published in A Journal Of Desire Armed issue #67 in 2009, and one by Dominique Ganawaabi originally published in Black Seed issue #7 in 2019. Both essays critique particular writings by John Zerzan from anti-civilization, indigenous, pro-anarchy perspectives. They are combined here to show two critiques of the anarcho-primitivist tendency from people sympathetic to aspects of it, but ultimately dissatisfied with it.

Black Seed and A Journal Of Desire Armed are both available from Little Black Cart, and you can find each of these writings in full on the anarchist library:

<https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/various-authors-black-seed-issue-7#toc10>

<https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/aragorn-have-you-heard-the-news>

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## Have You Heard the News? by Aragorn!

*Twilight of the Machines*

by John Zerzan

Feral House, 2008

141 pages. Paperback. \$12

The publication of another John Zerzan book will likely be responded to in entirely predictable ways by the majority of the anarchist milieu. Anyone who is not interested in green anarchist or anti-civilization thought will dismiss the book out of hand. It is a non-event. Similarly, since John is the best known North American anarchist, there will be those who turn to the book as a *State of the state-haters*, seeing it as something Zerzan has never claimed it to be, but perhaps is needed. Like his other books, *Twilight of the Machines* is a collection of Zerzan's articles — this time from his magazine *Green Anarchy*, *Species Traitor* and this magazine. For us this serves as an opportunity to revisit the role that primitivism is currently taking in anti-civilization thought and how Zerzan is serving in his role as its guardian. Using Zerzan's definition, the difference between primitivism and other liberatory theories (green or otherwise) is apparent.

*"A (misleadingly-named) "Man the Hunter" conference at the University of Chicago in 1966 launched the reversal of the Hobbesian view, which for centuries had provided ready justification for all the repressive institutions of a complex, imperializing Western culture. Supporting evidence for the new paradigm has come forth... and now form[s] the theoretical basis for everything from undergraduate course[s] to field research. Archaeologists continue to uncover examples of how our Paleolithic forbears led mainly peaceful, egalitarian, and healthy lives for about two million years. The challenge is to disprove George Grant's thesis that we live in "a world where only catastrophe can slow the unfolding of the potentialities of technique" and to actualize Claude Koroouh's judgment that revolution can only be redefined against progress." (107–108)*

The thematic elements of Zerzan's thought can be seen here. A use of apocalyptic imagery along with a deep ambivalence toward catastrophe itself, a fascination with the exposition of the

*"Ages ago, a certain South African bushman, Hochigan, hated animals, which at the time were endowed with speech. One day he disappeared, stealing their special gift. From then on, animals have never spoken again. Descartes tells us that monkeys could speak if they wished to, but they prefer to keep silent so they won't be made to work. In 1907, The Argentine writer Lugones published a story about a chimpanzee who was taught how to speak and died under the strain of the effort."*

Jorge Luis Borges

From *Book of Imaginary Beings*

believing that we can understand the development of a nation or a people objectively. More surrealism than empirical historiography, the essay tells the story of a fictionalized Latin American country. Examining the mythical facets that produce conquistadors, indians, and slaves might be more fruitful for comprehending colonialism than obsessing over exact dates and verifiable artifacts. The problem with Primitivism is not necessarily that it draws inspiration from the Other, but its fixation on knowing the final truth about what living in this world means. Those who use “postmodern” as an epithet come off as being fearful of the chaotic and irrational side of wilderness. It’s good that there are questions that might never be fully answered. The world, disenchanted or not, can still be met with wonderment as well as terror.

Unlike the vetted anthropologists and philosophers mentioned above, anarchists when telling stories to an anarchist audience about other life-ways, can say something different. In many ways, the writing from our sphere might seem like a poor imitation of what comes out of university humanities or social science departments (at its worse it certainly is), but, for what we lose in resources and prestige we gain a smaller and more accessible dialogue. How anarchists might use the knowledge of specialists and how to disagree in a way that steers clear of resentful polemics are questions guiding this provocation. Primitivism’s relationship to anthropology and the lived experience of Native Americans should be countered with our own speculations. Nihilism and postmodernism are not flags to wave or some self-applied identity, but sets of interpretations that help explain our present situation. In place of an all-encompassing theory composed of the hidden platonic forms that shape Primitivism, we can create a cosmology of direct experience. Zerzan continues to represent the worst aspects of both Christianity and scientism. The great Leviathan, that impulse that drags free creatures into enslavement, has been usurped by the Behemoth, a monster so massive and indifferent to our existence that it is almost impossible to comprehend. Ethnology is just as needed as science fiction for finding inspiration for other ways to live. We will always come up with new stories, as well as retell many from the past, as long as we have desires that are still in motion.

ideologies of Archaeology and Anthropology, and a preference for a pastoral way of life. These themes continue to be timely and barely explored due to bickering about implications that Zerzan has not made and doesn’t show much sympathy for — like mass die off; going “back to the land” (especially as a revolutionary practice); any other Khmer Rouge-like dystopic practices that might be imagined after hearing about anarcho-primitivism; the critique of domestication, civilization, and technology. These complaints are distractions that, mostly, ignore what Zerzan actually is interested in and transform the conversation that he is trying to have into one that is more salacious, simplistic, and barren.

## Anthropology

At its core (and even in its self-definition) anthropology is a humanist discipline. To the extent that Zerzan is also a humanist he uses (his predilection toward) anthropology to make the case about the kind of society he finds appealing. To the extent that he is not a humanist, or breaks with some tenets of humanism, he is interested in taking a central anthropological question in a more philosophical direction. This is the question of origins.

It seems that his interest in origins, at least in *Twilight of the Machines*, continues to be two-fold. First, and primarily, that the laundry list of “Big Issues” that radicals have with the existing order can be explained by a sort of *first anthropology*, an examination of how things were before the qualitative break called Civilization.

*“In the context of the generally egalitarian ethos of hunter-gatherer or foraging societies, anthropologists... have described a generally equal relationship between men and women. In such settings where the person who procures something also distributes it and where women procure about 80 percent of the sustenance, it is largely women who determine band society movements and camp locations. Similarly, evidence indicates that both women and men made the stone tools used by pre-agricultural peoples.” (12)*

More speculative is an idea that Zerzan has been touching on since *Elements of Refusal* (CAL Press 1999) with his essay “Language: Origin and Meaning,” which is about the origin of alienation itself.

Within radical circles alienation is a code word containing a lot of sub-text that can be missed on first introduction. Alienation, in

particular, is coded with a Marxist idea about how workers are alienated from their creation by the capitalists' ownership of the means of production and ownership of the product of that workers labor. In the young Marx, alienation has a more theoretical definition that remains a central term used by (and a concern of) both anti-state communists and Zerzan (whose background as a Marxist can't be understated). Alienation is the action by which people (and groups) become alien to the results of their own activity, the environment in which that activity occurs, to the people who share that environment and activity, and to themselves. Most anti-state communist interest in alienation remains firmly focused on the economy, economic relations, and how to engage in the midst of economic tension to affect social change. Here is Zerzan's innovation: Instead of following the Marxist line of eternal fascination with alienation as simply synonymous with economic relationships, he looks to other human endeavors, in particular to pre-industrial, pre-capitalist *world-building* that seems to have led to the current economic alienation. The question for Zerzan and the anarcho-primitivists he has inspired is "Where did alienation begin?" Their answer appears to be with the creation of symbolic thought and the culture that arose as a result.

**"Kevin Tucker:** *How would you distinguish symbolic culture and symbolic thought, and what is their relation to civilization?*

**John Zerzan:** *What followed after the species began to symbolize constitutes symbolic culture. This ethos has come to define what thinking is, and the sensual part of experience has to [sic] greatly given way to symbolic experience; that is, direct experience is being reduced toward zero point... Symbolic culture in the forms of art and religion, for example, involve re-presented reality being thus processed as substitute for direct experience. They emerge as societies begin to develop inequalities that express themselves in specialized roles and realms of separate authority."* (51)

For non-primitivist anarchists who are also interested in anthropology as a way to talk about human history, the frustration is how rigid the anarcho-primitivist view of anthropology seems to be. Rather than critically evaluate *all* of anthropology for the use of anarchists, anarcho-primitivists have chosen a view of egalitarian gatherer-hunters that is defined by a school of anthropologists who are in honest contention with others about their perspective and the evaluation of the same evidence. If it is possible to come to

songs to be cataloged with the same zeal as entomologists who pin butterflies under glass displays, should seem absurd to those of us endeared to the natural world. Modern Native Americans continue to be the most vocal about distrust for anthropologists; even in the age of rigorous ethics review boards, sacred objects and ancestral remains line the shelves of university vaults. This ideology probably should have been retired to the archive a long time ago but, a decaying Mayan calendar is right every millennia or so. The rise of agriculture, like any other subject, is worth looking at as to how it might relate to the formation of social hierarchies. It could be argued that classifying societies according to their food production methods is just another iteration of historical materialism, but if we think of bricolage instead of engineering, that sin can be forgiven. Every weapon should remain available to us. Anthropology has an intensely racist past and is embedded in a profit-driven university apparatus that hasn't moved far beyond the failings of scientific positivism. Still, there are some expressions from within this discipline that are worthy of attention from anarchists. Something left out of the story is that many of the strongest criticisms of anthropology emerged from within the field itself. The 1960s generation of New Anthropology was birthed at a time when radicals were beginning to interrogate even the sacred assumptions of classical Marxism; questioning anthropology as science was a necessary conclusion. Theorists at the time turned to the ideas of Heidegger, Gramsci, the Frankfurt School, and an assemblage of "unreadable" texts by Foucault, Derrida, and Lacan to deconstruct and re-envision the discipline.

The go-to ethnographer for the more rebellion-inclined is Pierre Clastres, who views tribal people as Nietzschean warriors always ready to throw poison darts into the throats of would-be rulers. This is appealing compared to primitivist claims that hunter-gatherers were mostly conflict-free proto-liberals. I also, at times, identify with Chimpanzees more than Bonobos, but anthropomorphism yields different results than learning a new dance by watching elk play. Instead of looking at nonwestern societies with the goal of learning about other cultures, anthropology can be used to find something out about ourselves. Writer Michael Taussig does this better than almost anyone. People on the edge of the industrial mono-world can show us how irrational and destructive this civilization really is. Anthropology can be an implement to understand mass society. "The Magic of the State" in particular, provides an example of how ethnology and history can be used without falling into the trap of

*sounds of words, not the criteria of shadows and natural reason, are limited in human consciousness and the distance of discourse.”*

Zerzan’s response:

*Which Parisian postmodernist wrote the above, you may ask? None other than Anishinaabe Gerald Vizenor, whose frequent references to post-structuralist/postmodern theorists such as Derrida and Roland Barthes, along with such unreadable passages as the one quoted above, help to identify him as a writer who is uninterested in the clear prose of Native stories. In fact, for him, according to Robert Berner, “traditional tribal narratives are only the inevitably tragic remnants of dying cultures.”*

Native people, since the earliest encounters with other cultures, have always adopted new tools if they served a purpose, practical or otherwise. In the modern context, French theory is no exception. In the same way that indigenous warriors would use Spanish horses and lances against intruders, native writers reinterpret western philosophical concepts and literary forms from phenomenology, to (coming of age) Bildungsroman, and indigenous futurisms. Tribal storytelling may often use simple language, but the meaning of the trickster archetype is far from immediately intelligible. It could also be argued that the indigenous influence on postmodernism is far more germane here than the specter of a poststructural abandonment of traditions. An abhorrence towards metanarratives is another way to say that hundreds of oral traditions, in different languages and settings, are preferable to the Latin “one true church”. The imaginative failure of Primitivism is related to the distinction between anarchy and Anarchism. The point is not to adopt the mostly passé assumptions of postmodernism, but to embrace ambiguity and playfulness as inherently valuable. Maybe he flirts with death and destruction, but the Coyote also desires sensuality and indulgence.

*Black Seed* has tried to distinguish itself from other anti-civilization projects by emphasizing a strong critique of anthropology and humanism. This clear distancing from primitivist ideology as personified by Zerzan, takes place against the backdrop of years’ long conversations in the green anarchist milieu about the limitations of using an anthropological lens as the primary way to understand people. Khaki-clad explorers, who collect dreams and

different conclusions based on the same evidence, then the reason that you choose one — especially if you call it *the* right one — has little to do with the evidence itself. In the case of Zerzan, the reasons aren’t stated directly. Obliquely he reacts most strongly to the extreme stylization and rapaciousness of techno-industrial culture, and has clearly been influenced by the green direct action milieu that has been active around his home in the Pacific Northwest over the past 20 years. But this doesn’t seem to be enough to explain his particular affinity towards Sahlins’ position against Obeyesekere’s in the conflict between anthropologists. Our concern isn’t for one set of views within anthropology versus another. The utility of anthropology for anarchists looking for a practice or a theory is marginal at best. Our concern is that an exploration about origins (which is worthwhile) should have so much to do with the discourse of any academic discipline. Anthropology just happens to be the choice of one set of anarchists; economics is the choice of another group, while sociology, philosophy, multicultural studies, etc, reflect the preferences of others. All of these disciplines have things to offer any critical thinker, but it indicates a naivety and lack of imagination for any anarchist to act as a popularizer of, or advocate for, positions that originate in the academy (with the consequent biases). This continues to be the hallmark of far too many anarchists.

## Genocide

*When asked by an anthropologist what the Indians called America before the white man came, an Indian said simply, “Ours.”*

— Vine Deloria Jr.

There are many different origin stories we can explore. We can explore our origins with the nation-building intention of constructing a narrative of our great journey from and back to a homeland, we can use origins to tell ourselves a story about all of natural history beginning in a garden somewhere along the river Nile, or one about great leaders, or about struggles.

What differentiates Zerzan’s origins story from these others is that it is not just a story about an appealing society, but an articulation of the desire for that society that is a-political:

*"It is becoming too obvious that what bars our way is our failure to put an end to the reigning institutions and illusions. We must allow ourselves to see what has happened to us, including the origins of the disaster. At the same time we realize that true revolt is inspired by the realization that it is not impossible to bring the disaster to a halt, to imagine and strike out in new directions — to find our way back home." (125)*

Here Zerzan is on point. To find our way home we are going to have to follow a different path than that of institutions and illusions. What is the experience that distinguishes nearly all of us and could, and should, rightfully be called the origin story of this civilization? This experience is genocide, the deliberate destruction of a multi-generational social body. Especially on this continent, every social body has a story of systematic violence, amnesia, and denial that has shaped them into a form that can be called civilized. This is true of those who were captured, enslaved, and brought here to live in servitude for generations, those who escaped to here only to be assimilated within generations, those who fled from famine, or the majority of people who no longer remember their people's creation story.

The spectacular genocides of the twentieth century have put a bad taste into the mouths of people (politicians) who otherwise totally agree with the strategies employed but who, politely, believe that they should be practiced over generations and with many of the trappings of consent. What is the difference between forced migrations and concentration camps other than the size of the body count? Or between a Native American boarding school and a reeducation camp, except for the use of charitable language around helping poor children? What is the difference between blood quantum laws (contemporary, United States) and Genetic Health Courts (1933–45, Germany), other than which side of the historical moment we are on? What is the difference between Americanization and genocide?

For most of us, reaching back in time (behind the systematic removal of our memories of ourselves, our choices, and our terrains) can only be done through the mechanisms introduced by European Enlightenment thought. Discussing "home," anarchy, or any sort of better world is done through literature, anthropology, or religious texts that, for all their positive traits, are also designs conceived of after our multicultural social forms have been

that they have to offer: namely, the idea that civilization needs to be destroyed just as much as capitalism and the nation state. What Primitivism gets right is unfortunately difficult to access because of *how* its proponents communicate their ideas. More troubling (at least to me) than the possible racism or sloppy methodology are the rigidity of thought, totalizing worldview, and unflinching ideological hubris. Rejecting the trickster spirit in native theory as postmodern is more objectionable here than disagreements over specific definitions of wildness or domestication. Coyote has always resisted easy categorization. Zerzan comes away from a brush with a trickster saying...

*"Going against all that is forbidden, trickster is a comic inversion of the official story, he deconstructs social limits. As Nanabozho of the Ojibway tradition, he is alternately the savior of his people, and a buffoon and sexual aggressor. I offer the words of this essay in acknowledgment of my place as a non-native outsider, in hopes of possible, if slight use-value. Anarcho-primitivist in orientation, I respect and am deeply inspired by the indigenous dimension, past and present. Postmodernism, in particular and in its more general cultural sense, has pitted itself against the idea of creation stories and grounded Trickster realities. The voice of cynicism, isolation, and technological ungroundedness, postmodernism insists on the "effacement of historical origins and endings." Accepting the fragmented and depthless reality of mass society, postmodernism is the turn away from traditions, away from origins, to the weightless zone of surface and word play. "*

We have to wonder how he conceives of a storytelling tradition that depends on something other than word play or what mythical worlds can escape the ethereal plane. How do the post-genocide avoid sounding dispossessed and nihilistic?

In the space between life and death that natives often exist in, between dawn and darkness, how can shadows appear without the arrival of sunlight? Zerzan goes on to analyze a quote from the same prominent native writer. *"Postindian consciousness is a rush of shadows in the distance, and the trace of natural reason to a bench of stones; the human silence of shadows over presence. The shadow is that sense of intransitive motion to the referent; the silence in memories. Shadows are neither absence of entities nor the burden of conceptual references. The shadows are the motions that mean silence, but not the presence or absence of entities. The*



## Towards an Anthropology as Science Fiction by Dominique Ganawaabi

Not long ago, Primitivism was a significant strand of North American anarchy. During the period of the WTO protests (culminating in the Battle of Seattle) and through the Green Scare repression of environmentalists, John Zerzan's ideas, about the dangers of technology were undeniably important to many on the left. Acting as a sort of fatherly spokesman for the shadowy figures of black bloc and clandestine eco-saboteurs, he communicated dangerous critiques of civilization, in a language that vaguely progressive readers could relate to, in interviews to large media outlets like *The New York Times*, *The Atlantic*, and *Vice News*. Those were perhaps more hopeful times. Protesters in Seattle were able to disrupt power in a way that seemed impossible before. Environmentalists and animal rights activists had a set of militant tactics that could cause some amount of damage to the systems they hated. It felt like we were winning and Zerzan was ready to suggest that even though things are always getting worse, our position was gaining momentum. "I really feel that we're getting to the point— and perhaps this is wishful thinking— that these ideas are about to burst on the scene." A time was coming in the future when anarchism would become mainstream. The situation *has* changed since then. It can be admitted that anarchists as a subculture are surely early adopters of practices that eventually spread to the wider society. For example, the formal sexual consent model and privilege discourses that were a part of the scene a decade ago, are now employed by corporate news pundits and politicians. Not all of us see this popularization as a victory. Today, radicals are seemingly more concerned with race and gender issues (mostly playing out on social media) than with globalization or climate change. Even though all of these problems were and continue to be equally relevant, priorities change over time. The easiest way to discredit Primitivism given the current climate would be to accuse it of racism towards indigenous people. While Derrick Jensen's Deep Green Resistance was essentially removed from the anarchist space for taking the wrong position on transgender issues, Zerzan's peculiar use of anthropology has thus far avoided facing similar consequences. The mere use of the word "primitive" might almost be enough to entice a purge but this kind of response would also mean not engaging with the things of value

destroyed. The ground that our memory is built upon is post-apocalyptic. The path from there to here is not only a story of horror; complicating matters is that it has now become invisible because we have been convinced that this story isn't true, that it never happened.

There are exceptions to this amnesiac society. There are groups, small and shrinking, of people who have lived contiguously and were not entirely erased. That have continued to live. To survive. If we hold a position that the lifeways of these people are a model for a better way of life, then why isn't our highest priority getting to know about them, interacting with those who are available to teach us, and establishing ourselves along the path of their contiguous experience rather than living in our post-apocalyptic one? The civilized task of genocide has not been completed. There are real live non-civilized people who could aid and teach another generation on the specifics of what it would take to live differently. Zerzan appears to be calling for a different approach.

*"Where do we look for rescue? Our predicament points us toward a solution. The crisis of modernity is, in a very basic sense, a failure of vision in which our disembodied life-world has lost its "place" in existence. We no longer see ourselves within the webs and cycles of nature. The loss of a direct relationship to the world terminates a once universal human understanding of our oneness with the natural world. The principle of relatedness is at the heart of indigenous wisdom: traditional intimacy with the world as the immanent basis of spirituality. This understanding is an essential and irreplaceable foundation of human health and meaningfulness." (124)*

There is a clear disconnect, using the terminology of sympathetic anthropology, between proselytizing a lifeway assumed to be held by real living people and not relying on those people's own understanding of what that lifeway is, or how to live it. Perhaps it is a kind of heroism. Unlike the rest of the anti-civilization crowd, anarcho-primitivists actually state clearly "this is what we want" without caring about whether this has much basis in a living multi-generational people's experience, rather than the maintenance of a purely intellectual opposition to what is — without particular regard to the implications or efficacy.

The counter-cultural fascination with Native Americans in the 1960s and '70s is certainly a warning to urban anarchists who may

conclude that direct learning from another culture is a great idea. It should be painfully obvious, but it bears repeating, that not all members of a cultural or ethnic group have the same motivation, experience, or patience in dealing with members of another group. This is especially true if one group has been short-changed, while the other group represents socio-economic privilege, expectation (of knowledge and hospitality), and is not resolute in their own motivations. People are not ideas and do not conform to the expectations we might have of them. Dilettantes aren't as fascinating.

Somewhere in this tension between the lessons (that should have been) learned from the '70s and the need that North American anarchists and radicals have to link up with multi-generational social bodies is a — if not the — practice for the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

*"It's an all or nothing struggle. Anarchy is just a name for those who embrace its promise of redemption and wholeness, and try to face up to how far we'll need to travel to get there. We humans once had it right, if the anthropologists are to be believed. Now we'll find out if we can get it right again. Quite possibly our last opportunity as a species." (68)*

Zerzan is not calling for this practice. He is a town crier informing us that danger is on the horizon. Danger is upon us! And we, urban, civilized, educated people, are the danger. Our loneliness, our need for pharmaceuticals, our obsession with technological toys... these are all signs of the corruption of the totality. We are the problem and, at best, it is only our self-aware effort to pull back from the abyss that will save, if not this civilization then, humanity from utter annihilation.

What Zerzan continues to miss is that for the bulk of humanity, including civilized people, this apocalypse has already happened. We are currently the over-populated survivors of total destruction, blinking in the sunlight of our own loss, wandering aimlessly for food and shelter. For people who come from multi-generational social bodies, the effort is merely to wait out the situation until those of us from the post-apocalypse find our way to them or fade into memory.

## Appendix: (Anti)politics

*Politics* is a word that increases in complexity the more our world does. It means at least three different things which overlap in meaning, but also conflict with each other. The first is the classic *war by other means* and entails the manipulation of social relationships involving power and authority. The second is the feminist-influenced and commonly used "personal as political," which implicates oneself and one's actions in consequences in the larger world and in other people's lives. Finally the third addresses the assumptions that go into both the previous two definitions. The idea of *anti-politics* is to break out of politics (as defined above) by calling into question their presumptions. As Wolfi Landstreicher puts it, being anti-political means being "opposed to any form of social organization — and any method of struggle — in which the decisions about how to live and struggle are separated from the execution of those decisions regardless of how democratic and participatory this separated decision-making process may be."

Anarchists who embrace anti-politics as a useful way to critique current events point to activists who work 60 to 80 hour weeks for non-profits in the name of political action, who police their own behavior but especially that of those around them — far more effectively than even surveillance society is willing to — in the name of "anti-oppression work," and who evoke a world of danger — of general strikes and insurrections — but who almost always end up engaging in pale reflections of those situations: marches, protests, and hope blocs.